DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 591 SP 014 489

AUTHOR Lerch, Harold A.; Welch, Paula D.
TITLE The Women's Swimming Association of New York: The Golden Years, 1920-1940.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 7p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletes; *Athletic Programs; *History; *Organizations (Groups); Recreational Facilities; *Swimming; Womens Athletics

ABSTRACT

Two decades in the history of the Women's Swimming Association (WSA) of New York are recollected. The organizational structure of the Association is outlined as it developed and changed in its early years. The facilities built and maintained by the club are described. The accomplishments of club members over this period of years are delineated, with particular emphasis on Olympic competition. The decline and eventual demise of the organization is discussed. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED174591

THE WOMEN'S SWIMMING ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK:

THE GOLDEN YEARS, 1920-1940

Harold A. Lerch

and

Paula D. Welch

University of Florida
College of Physical Education, Health, and Recreation
Department of Professional Physical Education
Room 302 Florida Gym
Gainesville, Florida 32611

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Harold A. Lerch

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SP 014489

The Women's Swimming Association (WSA) of New York provided American Women with their first opportunity to train for national and international competition under the auspices of an organization founded and developed by women. Charlotte Epstein assembled key swimming enthusiasts and on October 20, 1917 the Association was officially organized. (3) Several women coaches from New York City and approximately fifty members of the National Women's Lifesaving League were also in attendance at the initial meeting. The founding members agreed to promote interest in swimming, provide instruction in all phases of aquatics, and offer opportunities for competition. The WSA was almost immediately ready to enter the competitive arena when Claire Galligan, Lucy Freeman, Josephine Bartlett, and Charlotte Boyle, some of the most outstanding swimmers of the lifesaving League, joined the new organization. Charter members elected to offices were Ida Koverman, President; Charlotte Epstein, Vice-President; Elizabeth Fisher, Treasurer; Elsie Viets and Francis Ricker, secretaries. (7) By 1924 the Association had clearly defined its mission stated in the Constitution and By-Laws; "The purpose of this Association shall be to teach swimming and all branches of aquatics to women and girls, to encourage its practice and to promote competition therein." (1, p. 3)

The organizational structure of the Association strongly supported their competitive objective. A fifteen member Board of Governors directed the club's activities. They conducted and supervised the general business of the Association, authorized the expenditure of funds, and received and acted upon committee reports. The powerful competitive sports committee had control of all competitive activities, identified candidates for team membership, and directed the training program. (7, pp. 6-7)

WSA Headquarters

The WSA's headquarters consisted of several rented pools in New York City for the first twelve years of its existence. Permanent headquarters were established March 15, 1929. Located at 204-6 East 77th Street in the city (3) the four story brick building was built at a cost of $150,000.00 and represented the latest design of its day. The New York Times described its beauty:

> ...the pool is lofty occupying the space of three floors. High skylight windows extending across the entire...end admit the sunshine in fair weather.... The floor and lower part of the side walls...are in cream colored tiles also trimmed in pale green. The pool...affords

> even footing for 15 feet at the shallow end...for beginners...then the bottom shelves down gradually so that a deeper 60 foot course is available for advanced pupils and proficient swimmers. The pool is equipped with regulation 3 and 10 foot spring boards for fancy diving.... A balcony surrounds the natatorium at the height of the second floor, providing accomodations for spectators.... (11)

Spacious dressing rooms occupied almost the entire ground floor. The remaining space consisted of a foyer, offices, reception area and lounge. According to The Times, it was the first building of its kind established for the express purpose of housing a women's swimming club. (11)

Although the highly motivated naiads were destined to become intensly competitive, they were reminded of their expected demeanor summarized in the genteel motto, "good sportsmanship is greater than victory." (5) Elsie Viets Jennings, recalling the meaning of that motto some fifty years later in an interview with the authors, clung to the pre-Lombardian belief that "it was better to be a good loser than a good winner." (3)

AAU-WSA Feud

Six years after its inception the Association's Board of Governors realized their actions were not entirely autonomous. In the spring of 1923 the National Registration Committee of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) ruled that no American athletes would be permitted to compete abroad. The Union believed that lengthy trips would detract from Olympic preparation, therefore, world class swimmers Helen Wainwright, Aileen Riggin, and Gertrude Ederle were ordered to cancel their planned trip to England. Association spokeswoman Charlotte Epstein appealed to the AAU Board of Governors to reverse its action but the Union refused. The WSA had agreed to compete in seventeen meets between May 28, and June 30, 1923. The club promised a strong fight in an attempt to reverse the AAU ruling. On May 3, 1923 patrons of the New York Times read: "One of the stormiest battles in the history of the AAU is assured." (8)

In spite of the club's strong objections the Board of Governors of the AAU voted to sustain the decision of the National Registration Committee. (4) The WSA defied the AAU's decision and continued plans to send their swimmers to Europe. On May 16, 1923 the three naiads and their chaperone, Charlotte Epstein, sailed for England. (9) The swimmers, however, abruptly ended their summer swimming tour when the AAU demanded that they return to the United States.

In a move to become self-governing the Association approved tentative plans in November, 1924 to form a national federation of women's aquatic clubs. They had already assisted with the organization of women's swimming clubs in a number of cities, and Charlotte Epstein proposed that a national organization be formed which would control womens' swimming in the United States. (10)

Although having enthusiastic intentions and an established local organization, the WSA never succeeded in controlling women's swimming in the United States. The powerful Amateur Athletic Union had assumed control of women's swimming in November, 1914 and did not relinquish its national control. (6, p. 20)

The Golden Years

The golden years of the WSA were from 1920 to 1940 during which time the winged-foot organization launched America into national and international swimming prominence. At the helm was Louis de Brada Handley, the renouned swimming authority. Handley coached the club from its inception until his death in 1956. He, like other Association workers, received no compensation for coaching the team. Expert coaching and talented swimmers enabled the WSA to enter international competition in 1920. America's first distaff Olympic swimming and diving team was strengthened by members of the famed New York swimming group. Six of the fifteen team delegation were WSA members. American women, competing in the Antwerp Olympic Games of 1920, primarily because of performances by WSA swimmers and divers, achieved unprecedented success. American distaffers in their Olympic debut won four of the five aquatic titles. America's first Olympic swimming champion, Ethelda Bleibtrey won gold medals in two individual events and one team event while fourteen year old Aileen Riggin, also a WSA member, won the Olympic fancy diving crown.

During the Association's twenty "golden years" twenty-five Olympic team berths were claimed by the New York based club. In some instances the same swimmer competed in multiple events. The New York Club launched America into Olympic prominence by clearly dominating the 1920, 1924, and 1928 Games. America's second Olympic swimming and diving appearance in Paris during 1924 established America as a power among the world's naiads. The United States claimed five of the six titles in swimming and both diving events. WSA swimmer and future conqueror of the English channel, Gertrude Ederle led the United States by winning one gold and two bronze medals. Aileen Riggin, in her second Olympic appearance became the only member of the United States squad ever to win swimming and diving medals in the same Olympics. She won a silver medal in fancy diving and a bronze medal in the backstroke. The only double achievement of its kind was captured by Helen Wainwright when she won silver medals for fancy diving in 1920 and swimming in 1924. Gertrude Ederle, Helen Wainwright, and Martha Norelius swept the four hundred meters freestyle. Their finish marked the first and only time in Olympic history that all three swimmers came from the same club--the WSA. America's third Olympic swimming and diving delegation collected five of seven gold medals at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928. Seven of the eighteen team members were from the WSA. From 1920 to 1936 WSA swimmers and divers accounted for seven individual gold medals and had at least one swimmer on three championship four hundred meter relay teams. They won four silver medals and four bronze medals. The New Yorkers boasted that they could have, as a single club, won the Olympic competition in 1920 and 1924, and perhaps they could have.

Through the sports section of The New York Times and The New York Herald readers were continually informed of the WSA's activities. Some of America's most superb swimmers and divers, trained by the famed distaff swimming organization, made swimming news. Names like Gertrude Ederle, Eleanor Holm, Martha Norelius, Alice Lord, and Helen Wainwright dominated the sports pages. From 1920 to 1940, WSA swimmers held 111 national outdoor records and 64 national indoor records. They established 17 world records between 1920 and 1936. From 1925 to 1940 the WSA was the power to be challenged at the AAU's National Swimming and Diving Championships. Nine outdoor and indoor championships were claimed in this fifteen year span.

Decline of the WSA

By the late 1920's the production of Olympic caliber swimmers and divers began shifting to other parts of the country. In 1944, the WSA shared the domination of women's swimming with the Riviera Swimming Club of Indianapolis and the Multnomah Club of Portland. Collier's Magazine referred to the women's swimming powers as the "Big Three." No longer did the WSA enjoy the status associated with being America's number one swimming power. The advent of AAU age-group swimming competition in 1951 and its national implementation in 1952 furthered women's competitive swimming in the United States. In 1960 Barbara Nullmeyer and Mary Ruddy, in an unsuccessful attempt, became the last WSA members to try out for an Olympic team. (2) In that same year the powerful Santa Clara Swim Club under the tutelage of George Haines resumed the production of Olympians.

On September 30, 1974 the Women's Swimming Association of New York officially disbanded after fifty-seven years of existence. According to Elsie Viets Jennings and Handley's successor, Marie Giardini, the closing was due to four factors:

1. The declining membership meant less financial support,
2. Property taxes were continually increasing and the swimming pool became too costly to operate,
3. Parents, concerned for their children's safety, were reluctant to permit travel to the city for practice, and
4. Growth of other clubs in the region, staffed by an increasing number of qualified coaches, offered easier access for increasing numbers of swimmers. (2)

A prominent era in the development of women's swimming in the United States had come to a close. However, the purpose of the Women's Swimming Association was a very functional one in that aside from encouraging participation in a socially acceptable competitive outlet for women in the 1920's, women's competitive swimming was elevated to a new level of public consciousness through the production of Olympic caliber swimmers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Constitution and By-Laws of the Women's Swimming Association of New York, Inc. 1924.

2. Giardini, Marie. Questionnaire, April 21, 1978.

3. Jennings, Elsie Viets. Questionnaire, November 15, 1977.

4. Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States. Detroit, Michigan, November 17-19, 1923.

5. Riggin, Aileen. "Aquatics Exercise for Everyone, " The Forum. 80 (July, 1920).

6. Welch, Paula D. "The Emergence of American Women in the Summer Olympic Games." Unpublished dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1975.

7. The New York Times, October 21, 1917.

8. The New York Times, May 3, 1923.

9. The New York Times, May 16, 1923.

10. The New York Times, November 27, 1924.

11. The New York Times, March 14, 1929.